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# Communication Strategies

## for Achieving a Total Safety Culture

One of the most effective ways to improve a safety culture is to optimize safety-related communication throughout the organization. Unfortunately, employees often fail to speak up when they witness risky behaviors, even when they know they should.

Over the past 15 years, Safety Performance Solutions, Inc. (SPS) has administered their Safety Culture Survey to hundreds of organizations. The survey indicated that 90 percent of respondents believe employees should caution others when they're operating at-risk; however, only 60 percent actually do provide this critical feedback. Participants explained they are concerned that giving safety-related feedback will create conflict; and they often do not feel competent enough to give such feedback, and/or don't want to insult coworkers who have more experience.

Effective communication is an integral part of achieving an injury-free workplace. Most injuries are due, in part, to risky behaviors; and yet, employees are often reluctant to provide safety-related feedback to coworkers, because of a disconnect in communication. Organizations that promote empathic communication techniques will not only have a more positive work environment, but also a safer jobsite.

Ironically, while 74 percent of respondents from the SPS survey confirm they welcome peer observations for the purposes of receiving safety-related feedback; only 28 percent believe other employees feel the same way. The fact is, employees are more open to feedback when coworkers do a better job of providing and receiving it.

*Here are some guidelines for providing effective, corrective feedback to coworkers when they are working at-risk:*

- Don't make it personal – focus on behavior.
- Ask questions to facilitate discussion. Don't lecture.
- Give feedback immediately and one-on-one.
- Show genuine concern for the other person's well-being.
- Work together to find better solutions.
- Thank the person for listening.

*Here are some points to consider when receiving corrective feedback:*

- Actively listen and don't interrupt.
- Remain open and receptive.
- Don't get defensive.
- Discuss better ways of doing the task.
- Thank the person for providing feedback.

In addition to cautioning coworkers operating at-risk, it's important to praise employees who regularly do their jobs safely. This builds an open, positive safety culture and increases the likelihood work practices will be performed safely in the future. Employees at all organizational levels benefit from providing frequent, genuine praise for safe work practices.

## Communication Styles

A complicating factor with safety communication is that people have different *styles* of communicating. According to Marty Brounstein, who wrote *Communicating Effectively for Dummies*, there are four basic communication styles: Dominant, Passive, Passive-Aggressive and Empathic. The first three styles are generally maladaptive and stifle the development of a *Total Safety Culture*. The fourth style, the *empathic* communicator, is ideal and most conducive to effective communication and the improvement of an organization's culture.

### **The Dominant Communicator**

Dominant communicators tend to run people over in conversations. They tend to believe they're never wrong, their opinions are more

important than those of others' and people who disagree with them are either disloyal or misinformed.

*These characteristics often lead to the following maladaptive behaviors:*

- Publicly criticize others
- Blame others when problems arise
- Act bossy and negative
- Use verbally aggressive and threatening language
- Lack appreciation for the accomplishments of others
- Interrupt others, often finishing their sentences
- Dismiss new ideas without listening to the rationale

*Dominant communicators have the following effects on others:*

- Provoke fear, countercontrol and alienation
- Foster resistance, defiance, sabotaging, striking back, alliance formation, lying and covering-up behaviors
- Damage corporate culture and morale
- Hinder optimal organizational performance

### **The Passive Communicator**

Passive communicators tend to turn people off by being indirect and meek in their interpersonal communication. They tend to believe you shouldn't express your true feelings, make waves or disagree. They often think other people's opinions are more important than their own.

*These characteristics often lead to the following maladaptive behaviors:*

- Remain quiet, even when being treated unfairly
- Ask for permission unnecessarily
- Frequently complain rather than act
- Delegate personal choice to others
- Retreat from interpersonal conflict
- Agree rather than question direction
- Accept directions without questions

*Passive communicators have the following effects on others:*

- Frustration and mistrust because of not knowing where they stand.
- Presume they lack the courage to be a leader.
- Open communication is hindered.

### **The Passive-Aggressive Communicator**

Passive-Aggressive communicators tend to believe you should go behind people's backs instead of dealing with people directly.

*These unhealthy beliefs often lead to these undesirable behaviors:*

- Appearing to agree with others when they really don't.
- Making sarcastic remarks and taking subtle digs at others.
- Sending critical messages via email and copying others.
- Holding grudges and valuing "getting even."
- Sabotaging people behind their backs (i.e., spreading negative gossip).
- Refusing to help others.
- Giving others "the silent treatment."

*Passive-Aggressive communicators have the following effects on others:*

- Increased factions and favoritism
- Increased negative gossip or "back stabbing"
- Low interpersonal trust
- Diminished job performance
- Increased uncertainty and job dissatisfaction
- Increased turnover

### **The Empathic Communicator**

Unlike the previous three styles, the Empathic communicator interacts effectively with others to maintain healthy long-term relationships. Companies with numerous empathic communicators are likely to have more healthy organizational cultures.

*Empathic communicators generally believe:*

- Personal opinions and the opinions of others are important.
- The process of arriving at a decision (not just the outcome) is important.
- Getting input from others boosts morale and generally leads to better decision making.

*These beliefs often lead to these desirable behaviors:*

- Communicating expectations instead of demands.
- Focusing on proactive and action-oriented conversation.
- Stating realistic expectations.
- Communicating in a direct and honest manner.

- Working to achieve goals without compromising others.

*Empathic communicators have the following effects on others:*

- Increase perception of autonomy or personal control.
- Increased self-motivation to achieve and "go beyond the call of duty" for the organization.
- Improved sense of appreciation and respect.
- Increased levels of interpersonal trust, respect, honesty, and openness.
- Enhanced organizational performance.

Here are some fundamental communication guidelines to becoming a more empathic communicator:

### **Ten Guidelines to Becoming an Empathic Communicator**

- Be assertive, confident and action oriented.
- Express opinions directly and honestly.
- Show respect for others' opinions.
  - Listen carefully and thank others for their input.
  - Solicit opinions and ideas from others when making decisions. Avoid ignoring or verbally attacking others with a different opinion.
  - Offer choices rather than mandates.
- Invite others to join conversations, especially in meetings.
  - Reach out to people being excluded from conversation.
  - When an idea is dropped without acknowledgement, bring the idea up again to discuss and reach closure.
- Confront problems as soon as they occur.
  - Address the person directly, not through others.
  - Don't let negative feelings build up.
- Don't spread or listen to negative gossip
  - Sincere disclosures about one's self engenders trust and liking.
  - Ensure self-disclosures are appropriate and professional.

- Ask others about themselves and how they are doing.

- Spend more time getting to know others.
- Caring about others increases trust, liking, respect and morale.
- Use appropriate, tasteful humor.
- Use stories when appropriate to convey positions or establish rapport.
- Spread positive gossip.
- Request feedback after sharing ideas and opinions.

### **Improving Listening Skills**

Of course, empathic communicators are also active listeners. They listen for both emotion and content to understand what the other person is saying. They also reflect back what the speaker is saying to show understanding. In addition, empathic communicators use non-judgmental tones and avoid being too quick to offer advice or dismiss ideas.

When receiving safety feedback, effective listeners:

- Thank the person for providing feedback, regardless of how well it is given.
- Let others know if the feedback they receive is rude or abrasive.
- Don't be defensive about advice to improve.
- Collaborate with others on developing potential solutions.
- Reach consensus on actions to take.

### **Conclusion**

Effective communication is an integral part of achieving an injury-free workplace. Most injuries are due, in part, to risky behaviors; and yet, employees are often reluctant to provide safety-related feedback to coworkers, because of a disconnect in communication. Organizations that promote empathic communication techniques will not only have a more positive work environment, but also a safer jobsite.

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